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The Book L.B.J. Should Write

TIME Washington Bureau Chief Hugh Sidey has known Lyndon Johnson since the days when he was Senate majority leader. Having observed L.B.J. throughout his Administration as TIME's chief White House correspondent, Sidey offers these reflections on the memoirs that Johnson might have written:

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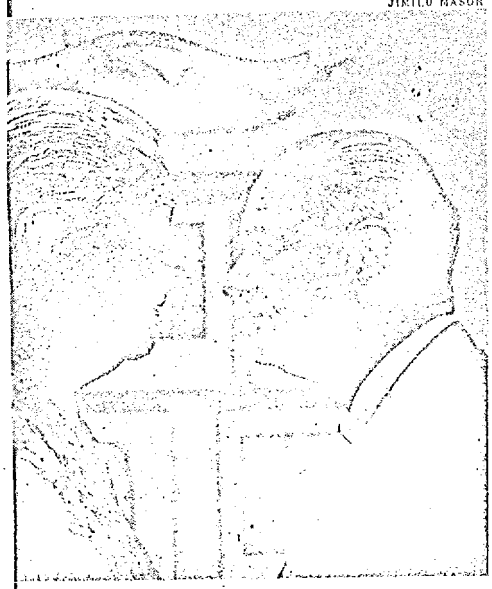

WITH SCULPTOR'S LIKENESS

HISTORY and the men who record it have always intimidated Lyndon B. Johnson. His book, *The Vantage Point*, is a nervous bow to the Harvard faculty, and thus not very Johnsonian. The next one should be for us; a thunderous account of this incredible man's 40 years in or near the center of power. That book is bottled up in him, and the problem is getting it out in its pure state.

They tell the story of L.B.J. reading in private a statement that he planned to make in public. When he finished one of his guests asked, "How do you feel about this in your own words?" The lessons that he learned from Franklin Roosevelt told in his "own words" would be utterly fascinating. Along the years we have caught glimpses: how F.D.R. regaled Johnson with an account of "a naked Russian woman" in order to deflect a request the young Congressman had made for money for a dam in Texas. Or how he sat at the old master's elbow as Roosevelt prepared to fire Ambassador Joseph Kennedy for saying in 1939 that Germany would not be beaten.

Sometimes after nightfall when Johnson gets mellow, he can remember every sight and sound of that day in 1941 when Sam Rayburn got the draft extended by a single vote, how the Speaker gaveled the House adjourned and jumped out of his chair when he saw a couple of opposing Congressmen coming up the aisle to vote.

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What happened to Johnson's deep distrust of generals and admirals? He carried it with him from the Congress up to the threshold of the presidency. Had it been intact in the Oval Office, Viet Nam might have been a different story. The official White House transcripts of the Johnson days show the high brass to be invincible warriors of unsurpassed wisdom; history has disproved that and Johnson used to know better.

L.B.J. could mimic Bill Fulbright ("the stud duck of the opposition"), Ev Dirksen and even Bob Kennedy until your sides ached with laughter. He knew men as no other national leader did. He knew their bank accounts, their mistresses, foibles, skills, their very hearts. Just how did he manipulate the Senate in 1957 to produce the first civil rights bill in almost a hundred years? For those of us in the gallery, it was an awesome display of leadership. How did he feel, and where did he go, and with whom did he talk when the moment came in the night that the bill was law and the Capitol was engulfed in the kind of emotion that comes only a few times in one life?

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There were times in the Cabinet room when Ev Dirksen and the President would lean across the mahogany and look each other in the eye and make a deal and nobody watching them would know exactly what it was or how they had arrived at it, but they would know that the die had been cast. That kind of reading might even keep Harvard awake.

What was it about Bobby Kennedy that really angered Johnson? The feud shaped a part of our history. Once Johnson roared that perhaps he should have fired all the Kennedy people because when he would call a play, they would run the other way.

His true assessment of Russia's Aleksei Kosygin has yet to be put down on paper. "Eisenhower told me never to trust a Communist," Johnson once insisted. "I believe him." How Johnson prepared for the Glassboro meeting, what he read in the man's eyes, how he employed his manipulative skills would be a whole chapter. The history of Johnson is the history of people —the sweaty, the beautiful, the profane, the great, the petty.

We might know more about the politics of 1968 if we knew all of what Johnson said to Senator Hubert Humphrey when he summoned him to the White House from Atlantic City four years earlier, kept him waiting an hour and a half, then told him that he was his choice for Vice President if he would not talk so much and . . .

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What mad scheme really possessed Johnson when he hurtled around the world in 4½ days in 1967, riding his exercise bicycle at 35,000 ft., heading for Rome at the last minute, swooping out of the Christmas Eve sky onto the Vatican in a fleet of whining helicopters, presenting Pope Paul with a plastic bust of himself and finally rushing off over the Atlantic like a startled Santa Claus?

Lyndon Johnson has seen and heard more of the important affairs of this nation and world than any other living American. He is like Mount Rushmore, a sort of elemental part of the land, shaped by men and events, but enduring. His titanic passions, his bleak hours of disappointment and self-pity, his seasons of compassion and gentleness, his moments of volcanic splendor should go down on paper in his cowboy-*cum*-statesman style. There has been and will be no one like him, a man of enormous energy who, whatever his virtues, made momentous mistakes —with the economy, with the war. He is still a special national resource. So would be the book that he should write.